

Saving Christmas

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It was Christmas Eve, and, like many families, we were going about our business without much regard for the beauty of life. We had attended church and a great Christmas party at a local friend's house, then had returned to our warm and cozy second-floor condo. The children were excited about all the presents under the tree, but little did they know how closely all of us would come to losing our lives before they had a chance to open anything.

My wife and I completed the usually frantic, last-minute wrapping that has become a tradition in our household. With cinnamon apples boiling on the stove, the aroma of Christmas filled the condo as we put finishing touches on our preparations for the coming morning. We finished shortly after midnight and sank into bed, exhausted but looking forward to the reactions of the children the next morning.

Sleep came very quickly. At 2 a.m., though, an alarm rudely awoke us. The carbon-monoxide alarm was beeping, and its audible warning had sounded. I quickly got out of bed to see what was wrong. "Was our alarm faulty like some rumors we had heard, or was this the real thing?" I wondered.

We opened all the windows, then called the local gas and electric company. About an hour later, a technician showed up, and I apologized for disrupting his Christmas Eve sleep. He started trying to find the reason for the alarm, asking if we had left a heater or stove on. I said no. A test of the carbon-monoxide levels revealed they were really high, so he told us to get out of the house and into the fresh air.

The technician didn't stop there. He headed to the enclosed garages under the condos, checking for the source of the high readings. He soon found the problem: An old gentleman accidentally had left his car running, with the garage door closed. I went to awaken him. When he finally pushed a remote, opening the garage door, the heat and fumes that flew out nearly were strong enough to knock a person over.

The technician and I then quickly awakened the residents of the other five condos in our building so they could test the carbon-monoxide levels in each. All the



readings were high, so we called the local fire department. All residents subsequently were evacuated into the cool and rainy early-morning air. The fire department left about an hour after arrival since no one had been injured, but the technician stayed until all the condos had safe carbon-monoxide readings.

Thanks to him and our carbon-monoxide detector—the only one in the whole building—lives were saved, and everyone indeed had a Merry Christmas. ■

Every home, including condos and apartments, should have a carbon-monoxide detector. Furnaces, hot-water heaters, and cars running in adjacent garages produce colorless, odorless carbon monoxide that can build up to toxic levels in enclosed spaces. Carbon-monoxide detectors should be placed in the same locations as smoke detectors.—Capt. Charlene Brassington, former NavOSH programs director, Naval Safety Center